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Older folks like Wii, PCs and cellphones, too

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**Personal Tech**  
Edward C. Baig



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By Jack Gruber, USA  
TODAY

Betty Pelkey, 73, a resident of the Greenspring retirement community in Springfield, Va., plays in a Nintendo Wii bowling league.

Health issues forced Ted Campbell, 79, to give up real bowling in 1965. But Campbell, a resident of the Greenspring retirement community in Springfield, Va., bowls all the time now — on a Nintendo Wii video game system in a bowling league he organized at Greenspring.

Seniors like Campbell are helping dispel an age-old stereotype: that folks getting up in years have little or no interest in the latest technology. Video games, PCs, cellphones and such can help keep minds and bodies sharp. Tech companies are starting to pay closer attention to the mature market, and to folks with physical disabilities.

**FULL COVERAGE:** [The latest from CES](#)

The topic of technology and aging takes center stage this weekend at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. On Saturday, CES hosts the first Silvers Summit, a showcase for products and services dedicated to keeping aging Boomers engaged, entertained and healthy. The day-long exhibition will feature speakers and/or product demonstrations from AARP, gaming giant Electronic Arts ([ERTS](#)), Google ([GOOG](#)), Hewlett-Packard ([HPO](#)), Intel ([INTC](#)), Microsoft ([MSET](#)) and Qualcomm ([QCOM](#)), among others. Sessions will address everything from online dating after 50 to home monitoring of elderly relatives.

According to Forrester Research, U.S. adults 64 and older who bought technology in a recent three-month period spent an average \$365 on consumer electronics products and \$429



⊕ [Enlarge](#) By Jack Gruber, USA TODAY

Residents at Greenspring retirement community in Springfield, Va., have formed a bowling league based on the Nintendo Wii video game system.

#### 'OUR GENERATION INVENTED IT'

**george w wrote:** [As a 74-year-old senior citizen, I use computers for everything from communications to banking. I found shopping for Christmas online a terrific advantage over walking the malls ...](#)

**GilPen wrote:** [I am 65 years old and have been working with computers and software since long before personal computers were invented ...](#)

**The Injector wrote:** [I bought my first desk top PC eight years ago when I was age 78. I mostly learned how to use it myself with a little help now and then from my 54-year-old son ...](#)

**gpNV wrote:** [What new technology? Does this mean I have to get rid of my manual typewriter, 8-track, CB radio, 45 records, cassette recorder, or Atari? I don't think so scooter.](#)

**Chuck Nyren wrote:** [It will be the baby boomers who will be the first to pick and choose, to ignore or be seduced by leading-edge technology. Write us off at your own peril ...](#)

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on computer hardware and peripherals. And Forrester points out that Americans 55 to 64 are more active in online finance, shopping and entertainment than those under 55.

EA says about a third of visitors to its [Pogo.com](#) puzzle, word and board game site are Boomers or older who say they play Pogo games to keep their minds sharp. Howard Byck, senior vice president of lifestyle products at AARP, says its own gaming area (*Sudoku*, *Solitaire*, etc.) is the most-visited part of aarp.org. He says 7 million Boomers without kids at home have video game systems.

At Greenspring, more than 200 people bowl on 30 teams in the Wii league, some bowling from electric carts, walkers or wheelchairs. Campbell reckons the average age is 82 or 83, the oldest a woman in her mid-90s. The biggest benefit is the social function, he says, and the opportunity "to do some exercise that they didn't do before."

And Mary Furlong, 60, a marketing consultant, says Boomers will never be seniors in the traditional sense. "Hell, no, they won't go," she says of Boomers trying to resist old age. "We text, we Skype, we Twitter," says Furlong.

#### Subtle tweaks for ease of use

"It is absolutely a business opportunity," says HP's Michael Takemura, director of the company's accessibility program, which develops products for people with disabilities and age-related limitations. Some of HP's product designs are subtle. Notebooks have single rather than dual latches so they can be opened with one hand. Desktop displays have dual hinges that can be lowered to accommodate people with multifocal lenses.

How HP and other tech companies are luring Boomers and, in some cases, their parents:

•**Senior-friendly computers.** HP and Microsoft are teaming on the SeniorPC. These are standard HP laptops, desktops or TouchSmart (touch-controlled) computers with a few extras. Notably: software that adds a shell on top of Windows with simple icons for browsing the Web, listening to music and sending e-mail. HP also includes memory games and prescriptions-management software to help track when and which medications are taken. Buyers can outfit the machines with options (some from third parties) such as a larger keyboard or trackball mouse.

For its part, Microsoft is improving the screen magnifier built inside Windows 7, the next version of its operating system. It can magnify video for the first time and magnify the entire screen as opposed to just a smaller window.

In recent years, Microsoft has also addressed some of the marketing challenges associated with accessibility and aging. In Windows XP, the company used a wheelchair icon and the term "accessibility" in the control panel. But people without a disability felt it didn't apply to them. So Microsoft removed the wheelchair icon in Windows Vista and Windows 7 and changed the language to "ease of access."

•**Smartphones for older people.** The ClarityLife C900 from Clarity isn't going to wow crowds like an iPhone. And at \$270 for an "unlocked" phone, or one not tied to a specific carrier, it isn't cheap. But the handset could be a smart choice for grandparents. It has a large, easy-to-read display and big buttons to simplify dialing. The sound is amplified, making it twice as loud, the company claims, as an ordinary cellphone.

A one-touch emergency-response button on the back of the phone lets seniors quickly summon assistance; the phone calls and texts up to five contacts, cycling through each until someone is reached. A siren lets users know the feature has been activated.

Clarity President Carsten Trads says that 85% to 90% of the company's users are 65 or older.

Clarity's chief competitor may be the Jitterbug phone made by Samsung. It has hearing aid compatibility and a noise-reduction cushion, and it's backed by round-the-clock U.S.-based customer service. Jitterbug reps can add numbers to the seniors' contact list remotely. Jitterbug has bright and comfortable keys. Rate plans for the \$147 device (no contract required) start at \$10 a month.

CEO David Inns says the company plans to add an Extra Care bundle that will include emergency roadside assistance and a live nurse feature. "Safety and security is the concern of this demographic," he says, "not games and TV on the phone."

The sweet-spot customer for the Jitterbug is 55 to 75. Still, Inns resists the senior-only label. "At the end of the day, what we want to be is a simple and elegant solution for everybody," he says.

**•Keeping mind and body sharp.** Microsoft's HealthVault and Google's Google Health provide free online repositories for personal health information (patient records, medicines, etc.). Patients get to decide with whom to share the information.

Prescription info might be imported from the pharmacy, or data can be uploaded from blood pressure cuffs, heart rate monitors and so forth. Google Health lets patients tap into third-party resources such as the Cleveland Clinic or TrialX.org (for finding clinical trials based on personal health information).

"This is a brand-new area. We don't know exactly how to get it right," says Roni Zeiger, a Google Health product manager and physician. Indeed, both the Google and Microsoft sites are still in beta, or test mode.

The \$199 EmWave Personal Stress Reliever from HeartMath is an iPod-size monitoring tool that uses colored lights to give real-time feedback on the stress in your body. More important, says CEO Bruce Cryer, is that you learn how to get yourself into a more stress-free zone. "The core science behind it is very solid," Cryer says of the 2-year-old product. "Our business even in a down economic year is growing."

Dakim's Brain Fitness system is meant to combat dementia through challenging and fun memory games and other cognitive exercises. The \$6,000 touch-screen, Linux-based computer appliance was sold initially to senior-living providers, with a \$1,200 yearly fee for up to 20 users. But a \$2,500 home version is coming (with a \$600 yearly fee for two users). The machine runs the company's proprietary customizable software but is not a regular PC. In one game, seniors are asked what they remember from movie clips shown from the 1930s and 1940s.

One of the most intriguing technologies comes from Proteus Biomedical in Redwood City, Calif. The company can add an ingestible microchip to a capsule or tablet, without altering the medicine. It's made of food ingredients.

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When you swallow the pill, it becomes electronically active and can send a signal through your body that looks like an EKG. It can be detected by a special, small bandage that might transmit data to a cellphone. Qualcomm is helping connect the special bandage to 3G phone networks. Caregivers or relatives will know when and what pills patients have taken or if the patients failed to take their medications.

The technology is in human trials. "We believe we have figured out a way for us to bring this to market with a wide variety of pharmaceutical products," perhaps by 2011 or 2012, says Proteus CEO Andy Thompson. Cost: fractions of a penny per pill.

### Keeping it simple

While many Baby Boomers have grown comfortable in the digital age, the same cannot always be said of their elderly parents. Just 43% of seventysomethings surveyed by Compete and the Consumer Electronics Association expect to purchase consumer electronics over the next 12 months, compared with 66% of those 18 to 34.

And only 8% of those in their 70s said they used a social-networking site in the week before they were asked, compared with 51% of those 18 to 34.

There's another reality: Even elders fluent in bits and bytes inevitably find it more difficult to hear or to see as they get older. And people in their 50s and 60s are more put off by products with too many features, buttons that are too small or confusing terminology, according to the CEA/Compete study.

Ferndale, Mich., start-up Myine Electronics is focusing on products with fewer features. "Our motto is, 'Less is more,' " says founder Jake Sigal, inventor of the USB turntable.

At the Silvers Summit, Sigal will show off one of his latest inventions, a kind of TiVo for radio called the Abbee Commercial-Free FM radio. The \$250 machine promises to record FM radio while automatically removing commercials and deejay chatter.

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